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SUBJECT: SOUTH OSSETIA: RUSSIAN VIEWS

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Classified By: PolMinCouns Alice G. Wells. Reason: 1.4 (b, d)

Summary

¶1. (C) Russian South Ossetia Negotiator Yuri Popov told us Russian domestic concerns in the North Caucasus will keep Russia hostile to the Georgian-backed Sanakoyev regime. Russian loyalty to Kokoity will last at least until the 2008 Russian presidential transition. Popov got the South Ossetians to agree to a Tbilisi plenary of the JCC, but he remains opposed to a meeting with an open agenda, which would degenerate into the sterile repetition of political positions. He hopes the U.S. will convince Georgia first to resolve "everyday" irritants such as water, roadblocks and fortifications to create the atmosphere for meaningful negotiations. End Summary.

Prospects for Meetings

¶2. (C) Popov gave us a readout July 17 on his last visit to Tbilisi and Tskhinvali. He expressed great appreciation for his July 12 meeting with Ambassador Tefft. Also on July 12 Popov and Joint Peacekeeping Force commander Kulakhmetov met with Georgian Conflict Resolution Minister Antadze and Georgian JPKF contingent commander Kurashvili. Popov was disappointed that Antadze refused to accompany him to Tskhinvali the next day. Popov (and his counterpart working

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on Abkhazia) are increasingly disillusioned with Antadze. They charge that he has no latitude of his own and merely follows instructions from MinInt Merabishvili.

¶3. (C) Popov remained suspicious of Antadze's proposal for a JCC plenary in Tbilisi. He believed it may be a "stunt," designed to fail and thereby show the ineffectiveness of the JCC format. Nonetheless, Popov persuaded South Ossetian negotiator Chochiyev to agree to the meeting. Negotiations as to venue continue as per reftel. Popov remains opposed to an "open agenda" that will allow the parties to posture and make political declarations. He hoped the U.S. will use its influence in Georgia to convince Antadze to work with an agenda -- starting with the draft that was "more or less agreed" in Istanbul last spring, but concentrating on day-to-day irritants such as water, roadblocks and fortifications. Clearing these away is necessary to create an atmosphere for meaningful negotiations. Popov hoped the U.S. will "exert positive influence on Tbilisi to show more cooperation, good will and flexibility."

Sanakoyev: You've Backed the Wrong Horse

¶4. (C) Popov said Russia rejects the Georgian proposal that

FM Bezhuashvili made to FM Lavrov in Istanbul on June 25. Russia cannot switch to backing Sanakoyev under any circumstances. Sanakoyev is tainted as a "national traitor" in the eyes not only of South Ossetians but also of Russia's North Caucasus ethnic groups. Perhaps in a generation nationalism will recede as the over-riding force engaging emotions in the region, but until then Sanakoyev bears a stain he cannot wash off, and Russia would be stained -- in the eyes of the North Caucasians -- if it recognized him. In the run-up to the 2008 Presidential transition, Putin and the Kremlin are taking no chances on inflaming emotions in the volatile North Caucasus.

15. (C) Right now, Popov continued, Kokoity is supported by nationalist emotions and by the visibility of Russian support. Russia does not consider Kokoity irreplaceable. But "the U.S. should impress upon the Georgian ruling elite that if they want to replace Kokoity they should have patience -- we will not do so before the elections."

Comment

16. (C) Popov may be using North Caucasus emotions as a convenient excuse, but the emotions are genuinely there. The South Ossetians enjoy the natural support of their brother North Ossetians. But we have been struck by how much explicitly pro-South Ossetian and anti-Georgian sentiment we have met among Dagestanis and Chechens (despite their traditional rivalry with Ossetians) as well as among the stridently pro-Abkhaz Cherkes, Kabardin and other Adyg peoples of the northwest Caucasus.
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